

# Bridging the gap: citizenship, participation and accountability

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## Introduction

Around the world, a growing crisis of legitimacy characterises the relationship between citizens and the institutions that affect their lives. In both North and South, citizens speak of mounting disillusionment with government, based on concerns about corruption, lack of responsiveness to the needs of the poor and the absence of a sense of connection with elected representatives and bureaucrats (Commonwealth Foundation 1999).

As traditional forms of political representation are being re-examined, direct democratic mechanisms are increasingly being drawn upon to enable citizens to play a more active part in decisions which affect their lives. In this context, the questions of how citizens – especially the poor – express voice and how institutional responsiveness and accountability can be ensured have become paramount.

In this article, we explore some of these challenges. Repositioning participation to embrace concerns with inclusive citizenship and rights, we examine a range of contemporary participatory mechanisms and strategies that seek to bridge the gap between citizens and the state.

## New contexts, new challenges

In many countries, measures to bring government 'closer to the people' through decentralisation and devolution have prompted shifts in approaches to service delivery that have widened spaces for citizen involvement. At the same time, the increasing marketisation of service delivery in many countries has introduced new roles for those who were formerly the 'beneficiaries' of government services. Users have come to be seen as 'consumers' or 'clients' and civil society organisations have become significant co-producers of what in the past were largely state functions. To some, these new roles are seen as welcome forms of partnership between the state, the market and civil society, while to others they suggest the danger that the state is off-loading its larger social responsibilities to private or non-governmental actors (Cornwall and Gaventa, 2000).

## Bridging the gap

In the past, there has been a tendency to respond to the gap that exists between citizens and state institutions in one of two ways. On the one hand, attention has been made to strengthening the processes of *participation* – that is the ways in which poor people exercise voice through new forms of inclusion, consultation and/or mobilisation designed to inform and to influence larger institutions and policies. On the other hand, growing attention has been paid to how to strengthen the *accountability* and *responsiveness* of these institutions and policies through changes in institutional design and a focus on the enabling structures for good governance. Each perspective has often perceived the other as inadequate, with one warning that consultation without attention to power and politics will lead to 'voice without influence' and the other arguing that reform of political institutions without attention to inclusion and consultation will only reinforce the status quo.

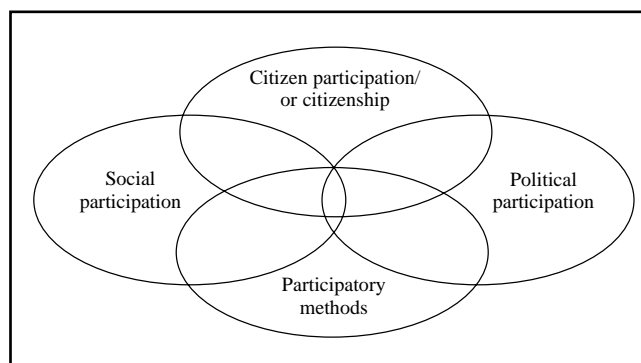
Increasingly, however, we are beginning to see the importance of working on *both* sides of the equation. As concerns about good governance and state responsiveness grow, questions about the capacity of citizens to engage and make demands on the state come to the fore. In both South and North, there is growing consensus that the way forward is found in a focus on *both* a more active and engaged civil society which can express demands of the citizenry *and* a more responsive and effective state which can secure the delivery of needed public services. At the heart of the new consensus of strong state and strong civil society are the need to develop both *participatory democracy* and *responsive government* as 'mutually reinforcing and supportive' (The Commonwealth Foundation, 1999:76, 82).

## Re-positioning participation

Both social participation and political participation have carried with them a distinctive set of methods or approaches for strengthening or enhancing participation. Traditionally, in the field of political participation, such methods have included voter education, enhancing the awareness of rights and responsibilities of citizens, lobbying and advocacy, often aimed towards developing a more informed citizenry who could hold elected

representatives more accountable. In the social and community spheres, we have seen the development of a number of broader participatory methods for appraisal, planning, monitoring large institutions, training and awareness building. The emphasis here has been on the importance of participation not only to hold others accountable, but also as a self-development process, starting with the articulation of grassroots needs and priorities and moving towards the establishment of self-sustaining local organisations.

**Figure 1 Linking approaches to participation**



Engagement in social and community participation has inevitably brought citizens in closer contact with the institutions and processes of governance. Conversely, leaders of projects, programmes and policy research initiatives have increasingly sought the voices and versions of poor people themselves.

Where citizens have been able to take up and use the spaces that participatory processes can open up, they have been able to use their agency to demand accountability, transparency and responsiveness from government institutions. An informed, mobilised citizenry is clearly in a better position to do so effectively; the capacities built through popular education on rights and responsibilities also extend beyond taking a more active interest in the ballot box. Equally importantly, however, where government agencies have taken an active interest in seeking responsiveness and have not only listened to but acted on citizens' concerns, otherwise adversarial and distant relationships have been transformed. Clearly, this also holds the promise of electoral advantage. These moves offer new spaces in which the concept of participation can be expanded to one of 'citizenship participation', linking participation in the political, community and social spheres (see Figure 1).

## New thinking about participation as a right

The concept of 'citizenship' has long been a disputed and value-laden one in democratic theory. New approaches to social citizenship seek to move beyond seeing the state as

bestowing rights and demanding responsibilities of its subjects. In doing so, they aim to bridge the gap between citizen and the state by recasting citizenship as practised rather than as given. Placing an emphasis on inclusive participation as the very foundation of democratic practice, these approaches suggest a more active notion of citizenship. This recognises the agency of citizens as 'makers and shapers' rather than as 'users and choosers' of interventions or services designed by others (Cornwall and Gaventa 2000). As Lister suggests, *'the right of participation in decision-making in social, economic, cultural and political life should be included in the nexus of basic human rights... Citizenship as participation can be seen as representing an expression of human agency in the political arena, broadly defined; citizenship as rights enables people to act as agents'* (Lister 1998), (1998:228).

Building on this new thinking about participation, inclusive citizenship, rights and responsibilities, DFID's recent strategy paper *Human Rights for Poor People* offers important new directions for participation in development. Using the more insistent language of 'obligation' rather than the softer term 'responsiveness', it enjoins governments to honour commitments to citizens. Casting participation as a human right in itself, it situates the right to participate as basic to the realisation of other human rights: *'Participation in decision-making is central to enabling people to claim their rights. Effective participation requires that the voices and interests of the poor are taken into account when decisions are made and that poor people are empowered to hold policy makers accountable'* (DFID 2000).

At the same time, there is a growing recognition that universal conceptions of citizenship rights, met through a uniform set of social policies, fail to recognise diversity and difference and may in fact serve to strengthen the exclusion of some while seeking inclusion of others (Ellison 1997). With this has come a renewed emphasis on inclusion and on issues of social justice. In all three spheres of political, social and community participation, greater emphasis is now being placed on the involvement of those with least power and voice, with particular attention being paid to measures to address entrenched gender bias.

## New spaces and places for citizenship participation

Such new thinking about citizenship, participation and rights raises the question of how to create new mechanisms, or spaces and places for citizen engagement. It also requires that greater attention is paid to the interface between citizens and the state, to the intermediaries who play an increasing role in bridging the gap and at processes that can enhance responsibility as well as responsiveness on all sides.

One area of innovation has been to extend the traditional places for citizen engagement from the episodic use of the ballot box. Conventional spaces such as public meetings and committees can be transformed when lent new powers and responsibilities, as user groups and citizen councils become actively involved in deliberation. Innovative processes taking place in public spaces where the majority of citizens spend their everyday lives involve more than a self-selecting few, opening up spaces for broader engagement. The use of PRA for poverty or well-being assessments, for example, offers ways of taking the consultation process to citizens in their own spaces. Legislative theatre performances draw together policy makers, service commissioners, providers and managers with community members to engage with the lived realities of everyday life and explore solutions to real-life dilemmas.

Another emerging space for the exercise of citizenship has come with the opening up, and indeed the levering open through citizen action, of formerly closed-off decision-making processes. On the one hand, in a number of countries enabling national policy has created a new imperative to consult and involve. In Bolivia and Brazil, for example, participatory municipal planning and budgeting, respectively, have national or state backing. In the UK, central government support for public involvement has led to a wave of innovation in consultation over a number of high-profile government schemes. The adoption of participatory mechanisms for project and programme planning has extended beyond the bounds of discrete initiatives, in some contexts, to on-going processes of citizen involvement in monitoring and evaluation through which citizens play a part not only in offering opinions but also in holding agencies to account.

On the other hand, the increasing use of participatory and deliberative processes have contested and begun to reconfigure the boundaries between 'expertise' and 'experience' (Gaventa 1993). As citizens are increasingly considered to have opinions that matter and experience that counts, government agencies have involved them more in the kinds of decisions that were once presented as technical, rather than acknowledged as value-laden and political. Nowhere is this more the case than in the opening up of public expenditure budgeting to citizen engagement, as has been the case in several municipalities in Brazil. At the local level, a growing emphasis on the co-production and co-management of services has also served to create new spaces for citizen involvement, as the 'owners', and to some extent the 'makers and shapers', rather than simply 'users and choosers' of services.

In other contexts, pressure placed on governments by civil society organisations has forced open spaces through demands for responsiveness and accountability. Perhaps

the most notable example of this is the work of MKSS in India, whose public hearings on recorded public expenditure have named and shamed officials and exposed graft to audiences of thousands of citizens (Goetz 1999). Numerous other examples exist where NGOs have sought to intermediate between government and citizens through the use of participatory mechanisms for enhanced service responsiveness and accountability; for example in the growing move for citizen involvement in local health service management.

In areas characterised by uncertainty, the use of mechanisms such as citizens' juries offers an important new dimension: moving beyond eliciting opinions from citizens towards a process in which views are aired and defended, in which contrasting knowledge and versions are weighed up and interrogated, before 'judgements' are sought. These processes offer a valuable corrective to the tendency found in some participatory processes of simply gathering people's views, rather than providing opportunities for exploration, analysis and debate.

At the same time, citizen involvement in processes where the emphasis has been on mutual learning and new courses of action has helped mould new forms of consensus, bridging differences of interest and perspective within communities as well as between community members and statutory or non-statutory agencies. This, in turn, has helped create better mutual understanding and with it, the prospects for enhancing relationships that were previously characterised by mistrust, suspicion and distance.

## Making participation real

Forms of participation run across a spectrum, from tokenism and manipulation to devolved power and citizen control. As the uses of invited participation to rubber stamp and provide legitimacy for preconceived interventions grows, citizens are becoming increasingly sceptical. A recent report by the Commission on Poverty, Participation and Power in the UK for instance warns of 'phoney' participation, in which power relations do not shift, and in which rhetoric is not reflected in reality.

In this context, making participation real raises a set of complex challenges. A key challenge is building confidence in the willingness of agencies to hear rather than simply to listen, nod and do what they were going to do in the first place. Where the use of participatory methods for consultation has often been most effective is where institutional willingness to respond is championed by high-level advocates within organisations. Where such 'champions' exist and where they can create sufficient momentum within organisations, the processes of invited participation that they help instigate can make a real difference.

New public management strategies emphasise incentives for change from within. One important incentive is to be 'championed' as a model for others to follow, as an example of good practice. Equally, recognising and rewarding changes in practice can have significant ripple effects. By creating spaces within bureaucracies in which responsiveness is valued, wider changes become possible.

Yet, as we suggest earlier, such changes are only one part of the story. The best-laid plans for public involvement can falter where citizens express disinterest and where cynical public officials simply go through the motions with no real commitment to change. Citizen monitoring and other forms of citizen action can help force some measure of accountability. To do so effectively, however, requires a level of organisation and persistence that is often beyond many communities who are involved in consultation exercises. Building the preconditions for voice and enabling citizens to actively take up and make use of available spaces for engagement calls for new combinations of older approaches to social, community and political participation.

It is in this that some of the most exciting challenges for a new generation of participatory processes reside: in ways of building more deliberation into consultative processes; in participatory rights assessments that enable people to recognise and articulate their rights; and in moves that turn the tables on processes to gather 'voices' to enable poor people to engage in analysing the policies and institutions that affect their lives, as a starting point for changes that will make a difference.

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## Notes

This note borrows from material prepared for a project with Anne-Marie Goetz, et. al. 'From Consultation to Influence: Bringing Citizen Voice and Client Focus into Service Delivery' (forthcoming).

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